

Washington University in St. Louis

## Washington University Open Scholarship

---

Volume 12

Washington University  
Undergraduate Research Digest

---

Spring 2017

### Mapping Prejudice: A Perceptual Dialectology Approach to Evaluating Language Attitudes towards South-Perceived Speech in the United States

Marie Bissell

*Washington University in St. Louis*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/wuurd\\_vol12](https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/wuurd_vol12)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Bissell, Marie, "Mapping Prejudice: A Perceptual Dialectology Approach to Evaluating Language Attitudes towards South-Perceived Speech in the United States" (2017). *Volume 12*. 18.  
[https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/wuurd\\_vol12/18](https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/wuurd_vol12/18)

This Abstracts A-I is brought to you for free and open access by the Washington University Undergraduate Research Digest at Washington University Open Scholarship. It has been accepted for inclusion in Volume 12 by an authorized administrator of Washington University Open Scholarship. For more information, please contact [digital@wumail.wustl.edu](mailto:digital@wumail.wustl.edu).

MAPPING PREJUDICE:  
A PERCEPTUAL DIALECTOLOGY APPROACH  
TO EVALUATING LANGUAGE ATTITUDES TOWARDS  
SOUTH-PERCEIVED SPEECH IN THE UNITED STATES

*Marie Bissell*

*Mentor: John Baugh*

How individuals conceptualize and determine language attitude judgments is a recurring question in the field of sociolinguistics. This study provides evidence that everyday speakers of English in the United States think about and assign characteristics to speakers perceived to be from the American South in a particular, negative way. 77 undergraduate students were asked to complete a survey consisting of 12 audio samples from different regions, each of which was paired with a Likert matrix of attitudinal labels (intelligent, educated, wealthy, likeable, formal, correct) and a heat map for indicating where the participant perceived the sample's origin to be located. Statistical analyses using single sample t-tests reveal that South-perceived speech samples were rated significantly lower than average ( $p = .01$ ) on measures of intelligence, education, wealth, and formality. A vowel variant analysis of each speech sample demonstrates that the consistently common phonetic feature among these South-perceived items is multiple instances of the Southern Vowel Shift in words such as /fav/, which reflects monophthongization, and /kiɪdz/, which reflects what is often termed the "Southern twang." On the other hand, speech samples that are not South-perceived are often interpreted as regionally ambiguous, with responses ranging from California to Chicago to New England. Even though these samples contain internal vowel variance as well, participants are less accurate at differentiating among their potential geographic origins than they are at distinguishing the South. The persistent distinctiveness of the South as a region in the consciousness of everyday Americans, as proposed by Preston, is discussed.